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Rogers, James Edwin
Thorold

The agricultural question

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THE AGRICULTURAL QUESTION.

By James E. Thorold Rogers, M.P.

The inhabitants of Great Britain, from Sutherlandshire to Cornwall, in town and country alike, are suffering from a state of things which is so disastrous that a remedy must be found and that speedily, since delay makes matters only worse. I refer to the increasing dissociation of agricultural capital from agricultural skill, and the gradual impoverishment of the only agricultural interest which is worth considering, that of the cultivators of the soil and the labourers. Every competent person admits that the adequate cultivation of the soil needs, on an average, £10 an acre of floating capital. Six years ago, it was known that the farmers' capital was not more than £6 an acre, and it is alleged at present that it is less than £4. Such a stint means ruin. It is the true cause, or at least the principal cause, of trade depression in England. It is the explanation of the great and growing poverty which is only too evident in our large towns, to which unemployed and dispossessed farm labourers flock in hopes of some employment. A friend of mine, who is actively engaged in alleviating distress in South London, told me that a few days ago his committee collected and relieved over 200 men who had no means for a night's lodging, and had not tasted food for twelve hours, and that nearly all these persons were agricultural labourers who had been driven by lack of employment from the country into London,

In the face of this wide-spread and increasing mischief, all other topics are comparatively unimportant, and I am convinced that the remedy should be the earliest duty of the Legislature. Happily they who suffer most by the present state of things have at last been emancipated, and will speedily have an opportunity given them for dealing with the problem. This country can not long postpone the duty of agricultural reform, and a reform on the lines which have with the best results been laid down in Germany, in Denmark, and in Holland. The question is, How can we recall capital and labour to English agriculture? The causes of the disaster are obvious enough. Mr. James Howard has quoted figures from the Reports of the Commissioners of Inland Revenue to the effect that, between the years 1853 and 1877, farmers' rents had been increased 27·3 per cent. Since the disastrous year 1879 some of this rent has been "remitted," some farms have been thrown up, some have been re-let at lower rents, but it appears from the inquiries which Mr. Howard has made that, in 200 returns sent in to him by occupiers, the remission was on the average only 4 per cent., the reduction $9\frac{1}{2}$ per cent., and that the remissions and reductions together are 13 per cent.

Rent, as your readers are aware, is the advantage which the owner of the soil gets from the scarcity of supply, the price of the produce of land being in excess of the cost of getting the produce and the profit of the farmer. If the produce is worth £100, and the cost and profit absorb £90, £10 will assuredly go in rent. Rents increase as cost decreases and profits increase, and should decrease when the contrary phenomena are exhibited. But the rate of profit depends at an average on the quantity of capital which can be judiciously employed, and it is well known that profits tend to an equality. Decreasing capital involves decreasing profits, and it is plain that if the farmer's capital is lessened, and his rent remains stationary or increases, no excellence of the seasons will benefit him. He pays his rent out of his capital, and he is being steadily and surely impoverished. Let us conceive that he took a farm of four hundred acres, twenty-five years ago, with a capital of £4,000, and at a rent of £400. By successive increments his rent has been raised to £500. It is plain that he can pay such an increase only by increased skill—*i.e.*, by diminished cost—if prices remain stationary, or by increased profits (if prices rise), or out of his capital. What has been done by the first of these processes has been more than neutralised by the diminution of his capital, now unhappily notorious, and by the admitted deterioration of agricultural labour. He has gained something by the second process, for, except in the matter of wheat, the price of agricultural products is decidedly higher than it was thirty years ago. But unless the rise in price is accompanied by an increase in the quantity produced, or, at least, by an equal quantity of produce, the profits of the farmer may be stationary, or even declining. But there is good reason to believe that the produce is lessened. If the farmer's capital has lessened, the produce must have been lessened also. It remains that he has paid the increased rent out of his capital, a fact which has probably been disguised, for farmers are notoriously unskilled in drawing up a precise and accurate profit and loss account. This

may occur even in Scotland, where I see, from Mr. Howard's figures, that rents have been enhanced 42 per cent. between 1853 and 1877; and everyone knows that the distress of the Scotch farmer is as great as that of the English—perhaps greater. There is further proof that the enhanced rents have been paid out of capital in the fact that those farmers who have not been subjected to any increase of rent since 1853 are fairly well off now.

I have asked several landowners with whom I am acquainted on both sides of the House, and have uniformly been told that, where rents have not been raised within the last thirty years, tenants are satisfied, pay their rents, and hold their farms. Of course when tenants are hard to get, the wisest landowner will suffer in common with his less wise neighbours, for competition rent must be effected by a decline in the competition. The screw has been put on the tenant by virtue of a well-known rule in agriculture that a tenant cannot extricate his capital from his holding at the termination of his tenancy with a less loss than 10 per cent. of it. The tenant of a 400-acre farm, and with £4,000 capital, will therefore lose £400, or a whole year's profit, if he be dispossessed. Surveyors and land agents knew this, and shrewdly concluded that the farmer would rather pay 2s. 6d. an acre more—an additional £50 a year rent—than be mulcted of £400 at a stroke. They have killed the goose at last, I grant; but she has been some time a-dying, and with her death has come unspeakable disaster to the country. It is also probable that the margin of many great landowners' estates is not more than the 27 per cent. enhancement of 1853-77, but agriculture is not to be ruined because landowners have mortgaged their properties, any more than the people are to be starved by a tax on food in order that landowners may keep up their rents, rent being in the perverse imagination of many landowners the only agricultural interest in existence.

And now for the remedies. It may be necessary—and that in the teeth of the Liberty and Property Defence League—to fix judicial rents in England and Scotland, as they have been fixed in Ireland. But at least the sitting tenant must be protected against the contingency of the mulct referred to above, either by giving him damages for dispossession, or by according him fixity of tenure at a permanent rent, as was done in Denmark and Holland. Insecurity is fatal to enterprise, and the enterprise of the agriculturist is of the profoundest national importance. Rent is a matter of interest to no one else the landowner, except when by being over high it becomes injurious to every other interest. But successful agriculture is of the highest significance to the public, as producers in search of a market, as consumers who wish to lay out their means to the best advantage, as ratepayers who resent the waste of their substance, as Englishmen who wish well to their country.

Again, the labourer must be again attracted to the soil. He should have fixity of tenure in his cottage, and in a fair curtilage of three or four acres at a reasonable rent—a very poor equivalent for the nine million acres or more of which the landowners have plundered him (Tooke and Newmarch, *vi.*, 449) between 1700 and 1854, "more than a third of the

cultivated surface of England and Wales." Already there are ominous signs of the discontent felt in the country with the English land system, and a twelvemonth hence the labourers, who have suffered in the past, will have votes in the future. They are wanted in the country; they are wanted away from the towns. Sixteen years ago I advocated in your columns, after a personal inspection of the situation, what were called the three F's for Ireland. If they had been granted in 1868 the history of that country would have been very different, and its condition would also have been different from that which we witness now. There is a similar urgency in England. Farmers have been mocked by two futile Agricultural Holdings Acts, and illusive legislation is more irritating than the denial of all justice. But now the enfranchisement of the peasant is the emancipation of the farmer. The latter is no longer a potent factor in the counties. The peasant is not likely to vote for making his own food dear in order to keep up rents. He has no reason to love the landlords. — Reprinted from *The Daily News*, December 18th, 1884.

It seems incredible that Professor Rogers can see so plainly how the existing land system is causing ruin to the Nation generally, and not see the economic fallacy and deep wrong of permitting any such private power over so essential an element of human existence as the Land, apart from the incomparable gain its restoration to the Nation would be to the whole community. Even landlords, however selfishly disposed, should see their advantage in equitable land restoration, as they would be better off under the principles and terms proposed by this Society than they could be by any repetition of the Irish Land Act, which, comparatively, would do but little to ensure general well-being.

LAND NATIONALISATION SOCIETY.

OBJECT.—To equitably restore to the Nation its Land, so that all may have equal facilities to use and enjoy the Land, and equally benefit by the revenue from it.

The Council supply Lecturers where friends find a Chairman and a Public Room and are always glad to hear from those willing to co-operate in the movement.

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Remittances should be in favour of A. C. SWINTON, Cheques to be crossed "The Union Bank of London, Charing Cross." P.O.O. payable at Ludgate Circus, E.C.

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